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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 NEW DELHI 001773

SIPDIS

STATE FOR INR/B

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [IN](#)

SUBJECT: CONGRESS BEGINS PARTY CLEANUP IN HARYANA

REF: NEW DELHI 01710

Classified By: PolCouns Geoff Pyatt for Reasons 1.4 (B, D)

1. (C) Summary: Following a week of political turmoil in which Congress has taken a beating for playing fast and rough with the democratic process in several states, the party leadership moved to install a cleaner politician as Chief Minister of Haryana. Bhupinder Singh Hooda, a longtime Congress loyalist and a dark horse contender, was chosen for his anti-corruption credentials and clean political image. Hooda's selection suggests an effort by the party to do some damage control after the Goa and Jharkhand election missteps and to rebuild its image. End Summary.

Dark Horse Victory

2. (C) Senior Congress and Jat (predominantly a caste engaged in agricultural) leader Bhupinder Singh Hooda represents a new generation of Haryana political leaders. Although press reports indicated that he and former Chief Minister Bhajan Lal were the two top contenders to become Chief Minister, Congress insider Randeep Surjewala told the Mission that Hooda was never seriously discussed for the post and that the Congress had decided on Lal. After Congress was accused of attempting to impose governments on Goa and Jharkhand, Ambika Soni, Ahmed Patel, and other powerful Congress leaders purportedly urged party President Sonia Gandhi to drop Lal, who has been linked with corruption and unethical political practices, and to replace him with Hooda, who has a reputation as a relatively clean politician.

Expanding Congress, Base

3. (C) Caste factors also helped tip the scales in Hooda's favor, with Mrs. Gandhi accepting the argument that Hooda's appointment would expand the party's base among crucial Jat electorates in neighboring Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh. Both states are currently ruled by non-Congress governments, and have been targeted for takeover attempts. Hooda had carefully cultivated the Jats by encouraging their aspirations to have "one of their own" as Chief Minister, instead of the long-serving Lal, who is from a small, non-Jat caste.

4. (C) Well-connected television journalist Harish Gupta confirmed Surjewala's assessment, telling us that Ahmed Patel, Rahul Gandhi, and other influential Congress leaders argued to Mrs. Gandhi that following the fiascos in Goa and Jharkhand, the party had to cultivate a cleaner image.

Hurdles for Hooda

5. (SBU) Hooda, however, faces numerous challenges. He will have to resign his Lok Sabha seat and win election to the Haryana State Assembly within six months, and he may have difficulty fulfilling his election promises. Hooda, who projected himself as a "crusader against corruption," will have to establish and maintain a clean administration, a difficult task in a state known for its corrupt politicians. This will be of particular interest to us in the fast growing Gurgaon corridor, home to many US corporates. Hooda is likely to institute a thorough and impartial investigation into the alleged massive corruption against ousted Chief Minister and rival Jat leader Om Prakash Chautala, which could further roil the state's politics.

Party Stalwart

6. (U) A longtime Congress activist, Hooda began his political career under the patronage of his cousin, Birender Singh, a former Haryana Congress President. He served as the block Congress Committee president from 1972 to 1977, Haryana State Youth Congress senior vice-president from 1980 to 1982, and headed a district development council from 1983 to 1987. He entered mainstream politics in 1991 when he won a Parliamentary seat with a surprise upset victory against Devi Lal, the patriarch of Haryana politics. He became a Congress Committee Member in 1992, and served as the Haryana Congress Parliamentary Group convenor from 1994 to 1996. His only

stint in the state assembly came in 1996, but he resigned after being elected to the Lok Sabha. His career received a boost when then AICC President, Sita Ram Kesri, appointed him President of the Haryana Congress in 1997 following Congress's 1996 resounding defeat. He was elected to the Lower House for the fourth time in 1998.

Bio Data

17. (U) Known as "Bhupi" to his friends, Hooda was born on September 15, 1947 -- one month after India's Independence -- in a village in Haryana's Rohtak district. The son of veteran parliamentarian Choudhary Ranbir Singh, he is a farmer and lawyer by profession. He holds a BA and an LLB degree from Punjab University, Chandigarh, and Delhi University, respectively. His wife, Asha, has an MA in English. The couple have a son and a daughter. His interests range from social service to reading to sports, and he has traveled extensively.

Comment

18. (C) Hooda's selection indicates that Mrs. Gandhi and her inner circle have determined that Congress must adopt a more defensive strategy following the failure of takeover attempts in Jharkhand and Goa. Congress appears set to embark on a large damage control exercise, stressing clean politics and anti-corruption, in an attempt to rebuild an image that was badly eroded by the Jharkhand/Goa missteps. Congress leaders, such as Bhajan Lal, who have a track record of corruption and manipulation may be set aside for now in favor of those with cleaner reputations. Although the chastened Lal has for now accepted defeat gracefully, there is the potential for the politically astute, "old war horse" to cause trouble in the future. He has a history of cobbling together defectors from other parties, and could play a spoiler role for the Congress down the road.

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